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ABSTRACT

Based on cowboy poetry and songs, this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that Old West cowboys produced a category of literature, people still write cowboy poetry, and cowboy poetry or songs have certain characteristics. The main activity in the lesson involves students in analyzing a classic of cowboy literature and comparing and contrasting 19th-century cowboy literature with cowboy material being produced in the 21st century. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)

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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN: Cowboys

LENGTH OF LESSON: One class period

GRADE LEVEL: 6-8

SUBJECT AREA: U.S. History

CREDIT: Summer Productions, Inc.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the following:

1. Old West cowboys produced a category of literature.

2. People still write cowboy poetry.

3. Cowboy poetry or songs have certain characteristics.

MATERIALS:
For this lesson, you will need:

Text of the song "Whoopee Ti-Yi-Yo" (see Procedures)

Access to the Internet sites mentioned in Procedures

PROCEDURE:

1. Explain that much oral literature tends to be poetry and lyrics because those forms are easier to memorize than prose. The original American cowboys, like other inventors of oral literature, couldn't carry heavy books with them; furthermore, some early cowboys, like other creators of oral literature, might have been illiterate—and forced to memorize songs and poems rather than write them down. This project gives students an opportunity to analyze a classic of cowboy literature—anthologized since its creation in the 1880s, if not before. In addition, students will have a chance to compare and contrast 19th-century cowboy literature with cowboy material being produced today.

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2. Share the following quotation, from the Clanton Gang (http://www.clantongang.com/oldwest/trade.htm), with your students:

> Cowboy poetry is as old as cowboys themselves! For lack of better things to do after a hard day on the range, cowboys of the Old West would sit around the camp fire at night and entertain one another with poems, tall tales known as "windies," or just plain good ol' stories.

Elicit from students any situations in which they themselves have sat around, usually in the outdoors, with friends or relatives and entertained one another with poems, songs, and stories. (Sharing of oral literature is often a part of camping out and long car trips. Perhaps some of your students have had opportunities to stay with or travel with working cowboys; if so, can they verify the role of oral literature on the range or the dude ranches of today?)

3. Ask students to name or perform cowboy literature that they have previously been exposed to. Then share the words to the following song with them. (*Cowpuncher* is just another name for "cowboy"; *doggie* means "a motherless calf on the range" and is pronounced with the long *o* sound; *cholla,* pronounced "choya," is Spanish for "cactus.")

Whoopee Ti-Yi-Yo

As I was a-walkin' one mornin' for pleasure,
I spied a cowpuncher a-lopin' along.
His hat was throwed back and his spurs was a-jinglin'
And as he approached he was singin' this song:

Chorus
Whoopee ti-yi-yo, git along little dogies,
For you know that Wyoming'll be your new home.
Whoopee ti-yi-yo, git along little dogies,
For you know that Wyoming'll be your new home.

It's early in spring that we round up the dogies.
We mark them and brand them and bob off their tails.
We round up the horses, load up the chuckwagon,
And then throw the dogies up on the long trail.

Chorus
Your mother was raised away down in Texas,
Where the jimson weed and sandburs grow.
Now we'll fill you up on prickly pear and cholla,
Till you are all ready for the trail to Idaho.

Chorus
Oh, you'll be soup for Uncle Sam's Injuns,
"It's beef, heap beef!" I hear them cry.
Git along, git along, git along little dogies;
You'll be beef steers by and by.

Chorus

4. Encourage students to point out the elements of western dialect in "Whoopee Ti-Yi-Yo":

- Using *a* before present participles: *a-walkin'*
- Dropping the *g* from present participles and gerunds: mornin'
- Nonstandard verb form of *throwed* for *thrown*
- Nonstandard subject-verb agreement: *spurs was a-jinglin'*
- *Git* instead of *get*

5. Ask students what they might deduce about cowboys from this one song. Students may suggest that the singing cowboy sounds happy-go-lucky (a reality or a Hollywood concoction?); that if the cowboy has to sing, perhaps the work is boring; that the cowboy seems disrespectful toward Indians by calling them "Uncle Sam's Injuns," perhaps a reference to actions that implied the government owned the Native Americans.

6. Invite students to examine Web sites that publish contemporary cowboy poetry. In addition to the site mentioned previously, direct students to the following URL:

- (http://cattlepages.com/pubs/poetry/)
- http://www.cowboy.com/search/poetry/
- http://www.cowboypoetry.com/

On the last of these sites, Ben McKenzie's Toppenish Poetry Society, the contemporary poetry there is described as follows: "Some of it is great, some of it is good, and some of it just is."

7. Give students time to discuss in small groups characteristics of cowboys that they uncover from cowboy poetry or songs—old or new. If necessary, have them comment on what the poems or songs suggest about the following:

- Home
- Independence
- Education
- Talent; skills
- Attitude toward others

8. Ask the students to evaluate the quality of the poetry on the Web sites. Is it great? Is it good? Is it mediocre? How do students reach their evaluation?

ADAPTATIONS:

Adaptations for Older Students:
Focus this project more on old American cowboy literature than on the contemporary by asking students to research additional classics that started as oral works and only later were written down.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The video explores how popular notions of the cowboy were created by wild west shows and how these shows came to define the West. Discuss why this form of entertainment was so popular, and speculate about why people may readily accept this type of mythology. Then, consider the idea expressed in the video that city people need the sort of experiences the myth of the cowboy supplies. What are those experiences, and why might they be missing from our lives? Do you identify with those needs? How real is the cowboy myth? Can you find examples from television or the movies that show a similar type of myth-making today?

2. Who were the people involved in the production of Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild West Show" - both behind the scenes and in front of the audience? Why does the mythology of the West show the "noble" cowboy only as a white male?

3. What are the positive aspects of the skills and functions of cowboy life? Why do families, such as J.D. Gatsen's, pass down these skills and traditions? Considering all the jobs of a cowboy, list the negative, dangerous and unappealing aspects of the life and work. Does this life seem attractive to you? Why or why not?

4. It is mentioned that cowboys needed to have a certain etiquette if they were going to spend months at a time together. Why was this necessary? How does this compare, both in form and purpose, to the etiquette you practice at school, home, and elsewhere?

EVALUATION:

Observe students in small groups. Make notes about individual students' ability to treat one another respectfully and to participate but not dominate.

EXTENSION:

Ready to Hit the Trail
Ask students to prepare a list of gear and equipment that they would take as cowboys of today going off on a trail drive in the West. They should outfit themselves as completely as possible with clothing, tools, and electronics.

Rodeo Cruelty?
Ask students to investigate charges that animal rights groups have made about cruelty to animals in rodeos. They should check out what both sides say: what animal rights groups say and what western cattle or rodeo associations say. You may set up a class debate on the issue.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

"New Horizons for the American West"
Margaret Walsh, History Today, London, March 1994

WEB LINKS:

Lest We Forget
This page is dedicated to "researching, publishing, and disseminating historical and current documents that focus on the history and culture of African-Americans and other groups, their relationships, interactions, and contributions to the development and growth of this country." It includes links to information about African-Americans on the frontier, as cowboys, and as buffalo soldiers. Text, bibliographical information, and pictures are available, as well as schedules of special events and reenactments.
http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/portrait.htm

VOCABULARY:

amalgam
A mixture or combination of different things.
Context:
The wild west show was an amalgam of rodeo, round-up, patriot drama, and stage melodrama.

etiquette
The conduct and procedures to follow in conducting one's social interactions; a mark of good breeding.
Context:
If you go out on the trail, seven or eight people for seven months, there has to be some etiquette.

mythic
Relating to a popular belief or legend that has grown up around a person, object or idea and that exists only in the imagination.
Context:
We call him forth, that mythic cowboy.

rodeo
A competitive public event in which riders test their skills in activities related to livestock, such as bronco riding, bull riding, calf roping, and steer wrestling.
Context:
Modern rodeo descends from the wild west shows of the past.

ruffian
A bully or brutal person.
Context:
Before Buffalo Bill, dime novels portrayed cowboys as ruffians.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 6-8

Subject Area: U.S. history

Standard: Understands how the industrial revolution, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed American lives and led to regional tensions.

Benchmarks: Understands characteristics of life on the western frontier in the 19th century.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: U.S. history

Standard: Understands how the industrial revolution, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed American lives and led to regional tensions.

Benchmarks: Understands significant religious, social, and cultural changes in the American West.

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Video Information and Comprehension Questions

Video Description
Real cowboys were nothing like their Hollywood counterparts. Take a look at a real cowboy's world through film clips, contemporary photos and tools of the cowboy's trade.

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Download Comprehension Questions & Answers ▶

The Comprehension Questions are available to download as an RTF file. You can save the file to your desktop and open it in a word processing program.

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TITLE OF VIDEO:
Rediscovering America: The Real American Cowboy

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why does the legend of the cowboy appeal so much to Americans?

2. What was Buffalo Bill Cody's impact on the image of the cowboy?

3. Why was the cowboy's bandana important?

4. Why were there many black cowboys?

5. When and where did the first North American cattle herds develop?

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Rediscovering America: The Real American Cowboy

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. Why does the legend of the cowboy appeal so much to Americans?
Americans like the legend of the cowboy because it appears that the cowboy is completely independent, riding free and unencumbered, with no strings attached and no mortgage.

2. What was Buffalo Bill Cody's impact on the image of the cowboy?
Buffalo Bill Cody, as the first cowboy star, made the cowboy a national hero in his wild west show.

3. Why was the cowboy's bandana important?
The cowboy's bandana was important because it served many purposes. The bandana was a bandage, a tourniquet, a sling, a face protector, a hat, and even a dishcloth for the cowboy.

4. Why were there many black cowboys?
While there were originally black cowboys in Florida and Mexico before the English arrived at Jamestown, more became cowboys after the Civil War when freed slaves joined free blacks already engaged in this work.

5. When and where did the first North American cattle herds develop?
The first North American cattle herds were those assembled under policies set in Rome for Spanish Catholic missions in Texas and New Mexico.

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